

MEDIA

in development



REPORTING MAGAZINE ON THE CONFERENCE 'BETTER JOURNALISM, MORE FREEDOM', NIEUWSPOORT THE HAGUE, SEPTEMBER 2008 ORGANIZED BY FREE VOICE

FOCUS ON BETTER JOURNALISM, MORE FREEDOM

Five media
diseases (and
their cures)

Four sources
not enough for
al-Jazeera

Three enemies
of the press in
Palestine

Two Dutch
ministers
addressing the
conference

One universal
struggle for
quality and
freedom



What makes us tick...?

By Jan Keulen



He is insistent and suspicious: "Why are you organising this programme? Why are the Dutch financing a journalism workshop? There must be certain self-interest? Otherwise you wouldn't spend money on training Lebanese journalists."

He is a young, angry man; a Lebanese participant in our "Voice of Civil

Society" course in Beirut. His questioning is legitimate. In Lebanon most media are connected to political, religious or commercial interest groups. "The Lebanese media (...) have contributed to the alienation of the citizenry by not helping them participate in the affairs of their society" writes Nabil Dajani. "This alienation takes place by making the citizenry feel that they are distant and separate from the political process in society. The common Lebanese citizen cannot find any relationship to real life problems in the content of the mass media."

In a politicised society like the Lebanese it's hard to imagine that anybody would be just interested in "good journalism". Foreign media initiatives to win over Arab hearts and minds fuel further suspicion. Al-Hurra Television, BBC, Deutsche Welle and France 24 in Arabic were clearly set up as instruments of foreign policy.

In this context Free Voice's aspiration of "supporting good journalism and press freedom" is hard to explain. Free Voice was created to support our media colleagues internationally; not to bring a particular political, cultural or religious message. We think that professional journalism and a free media environment are indispensable for social and economic development. We simply believe that independent journalism has the power to contribute to a well and freely informed public.

It's in this spirit that Free Voice started to work in the Mena region. We based our work on the outcomes of the UN Arab Human Development Reports. In these reports the lack of basic freedoms, including the freedoms of opinion and expression, were identified as a cause of social and political stagnation.

The "Investing in the Future" programme enters a new phase in 2009 with a whole range of country-based and regional activities. We continue to contribute to raising professional journalistic standards, to legal protection of journalists and to press freedom in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and the Gulf.

Let's be in touch through the Arab Media Community (www.menassat.com) and of course let's continue to ask critical questions like the sceptical colleague from Lebanon did. Because that's what good journalism is all about.

Jan Keulen (Free Voice Programme Manager Middle East and North Africa)

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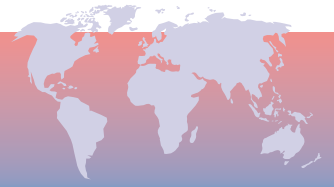


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Admirable courage

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Hans Verploeg

Sustaining the struggle

for better journalism and more freedom

“Arab governments don’t want independent media to reveal their deep-rooted corruption. Therefore fierce hatred exists between governments and media. Governments will always try to control the media and buy them if possible.” CDFJ President Nidal Mansour takes the bull by the horns in his opening remarks to the Free Voice conference “Better Journalism, More Freedom”. “The price of freedom of the media is blood,” he adds, “we need to remember all the journalists who died doing their jobs.”

There seems to be a continuous struggle in one way or another between government and media. Bengal journalist Nurul Kabir divides media into two groups: “Submissive media reproduce a system of culture and belief which helps perpetuate the autocratic system and keep people ignorant. Committed journalists have to oppose them and unearth the truth, because all governments have things to hide. Neutrality of journalism is a bogus slogan for me. Journalism equals political action.”

Nationalisation of media, repressive laws or outright violence are examples of state interference. But it’s not only governments who restrict media, society itself can be conservative and impose cultural or religious taboos. One of the main questions debated at the conference was: Should media push the limits of freedom and in what way?

Testing the water

Indonesian journalist Endy Bayouni cautions his colleagues to consider carefully before they act. “Each one of us probably knows how much the regime can accept in criticism. Your actions might lead to undesirable consequences. Experience is the guideline. This does not mean we should all be playing safe. We should walk on the line and from time to time try to test the water.”

Rita Barotta (Menassat website, Lebanon) describes how she avoids harassment or even arrest. “We have to tell the truth, but sometimes in a delicate way. So when a group of journalists was arrested,

I wrote they were ‘stopped for a cup of coffee for four hours’. It saved the situation, Hezbollah didn’t even call me.”

Frank Vermeulen (Dutch newspaper NRC) realises

it’s easy to comment from a safe country. Still he believes it doesn’t serve the cause of freedom of the press if journalists are using euphemisms or a



Frank Vermeulen: “Don’t use a secret language.”

secret language. “Journalists should write down the facts and let happen what happens.” Rita does not agree: “I am not using a secret language, I am stating the truth in a less offending way. Like saying your sweater could be another colour instead of ‘it sucks’. I am the one who has to live among Hezbollah after publication.”

Success stories: strikes

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat once didn’t like a picture of him. He had the photographer beaten up and sent an official to his sick bed, assuring him the perpetrator would be found. “We all knew this was bull shit and we decided to act,” remembers Faten Elwan, reporter for al-Hurra TV. “The government needs us as much as we need them. So we boycotted all government news for four days. Suddenly all anonymous beatings stopped. We don’t have to beg for protection, we do have power. The problem is most of the time we care more about our scoops.” Egyptian lawyer Ehab Salaam recounts a similar story in Egypt. “We call it Black Day. On 11th of



Rita Barotta: “Write down the truth in a delicate way.”



Photo © Maarten van den Haak

Moderator Bertus Hendriks tries to enforce the concept of "European minutes".

June 1996 all newspapers appeared in black. It was the escalation of a campaign against a new law regulating the profession. Reporters protested and also shared their counterarguments and alternatives. After the black newspapers, the government immediately stopped enforcement of the law."

Government tactics

Abeer Saady, journalist and Press syndicate board member in Egypt: "We consider the Black Day as our national day. We have to struggle and negotiate at the same time. Sustaining the struggle is crucial, because the government is very intelligent. For example in 2003 they promised to delete all articles of law that could lead to the imprisonment of journalists. Of course it took time, and some more time and it never happened. Still many people thought the battle was over. Another example: when the government extended the Emergency Law a few years ago, they fed journalists sensational stories about networks of homosexuals and devil worshippers to divert attention."

Chair Bertus Hendriks agrees: "In any country where a Ministry of Information exists, we are in trouble." Radio journalist Omar Abdal Rahman adds: "Media budgets only come second to the security budget in Arab countries. Governments use media for propaganda, mobilisation and disinformation. Freedom of expression is deteriorating while media expenditure is ever-increasing."

No limits?

Should freedom of expression be absolute or are there certain taboos or sore spots to be avoided? Endy Bayouni believes journalists' actions should

be two-fold: "We should respect certain values in a self-governing fashion, rather than let someone else impose regulations. However, it's also inherent to our profession to push and change norms."

Going too far can be counterproductive according to Ehab Salaam. "Criticising officials in an uncontrolled manner leads to repression that can cripple the cause of human rights defenders. Fitna is used by Arab governments to demonstrate the destructive nature of freedom of expression. Defending and advocating your rights doesn't mean you have to be a kamikaze."

Jordanian journalist Osama al-Sharif calls for a code of ethics created by journalists to help them perform better. "Journalists influence public opinion, a big responsibility. Even more so in a time when people understand each other less than 20 years ago, immersed as they are in their own personal universes. The story we tell must be as close to reality as possible."

One hand clapping

Success stories show journalists do have power, especially when they act collectively. The general conclusion at the conference was that we can still do more: standing up for freedom of expression in a responsible and sensible way and improving journalistic standards. Training and legal awareness cause better journalism and more freedom, but not overnight. Nidal Mansour concludes: "Change is a slow process. We need to deepen the regional specificity of our programmes. But one hand cannot clap alone, we need your hands to clap with us, your muscles to support us. We still have a long way to go." [JB]

The importance of free media

By Thijs Berman

The global future might look gloomy and good journalism is subject to many threats, but Thijs Berman is “too depressed to be a pessimist”. This European politician, formerly a first rate journalist, analyses the Internet revolution and its consequences for the role of journalists and the plight of politicians.

Let's look at the future as a space divided along three axes: solidarity, open society and innovation. Are we to share with each other or struggle, each for him - or herself? Are we to have a society controlled by authoritarian forces or a democratic and open one? Are we to innovate or come to a standstill? Democracy in the European Union is extremely diverse, but at least there is democracy. It is uncertain that 50 years from now the rest of the world will look like this and there is no cause for over-optimism. However, I am an optimist because I'm a politician and because I'm too depressed to be a pessimist.

Free media fit very well into this picture of three axes. They are crucial to innovation. Without the free flow of information people can't make informed choices about what to try and do with their creativity, what to research and where to invest. Innovation can only prosper when there are free minds in an open society. Emerging economies without an open society develop thanks to innovation and the free flow of information in other countries only.

In this process, the Internet is totally revolutionary. There are no geographical borders any longer, they are things of the past. The access to information has been democratised irreversibly, it can't be stopped. Every consumer is a potential producer and this changes the role of journalists.

Journalism as we know it is a product of enlightenment. Journalists from the nineteenth century up to the nineties of the twentieth century were an elite, although not always appreciated.

My grandfather was a politician and used to say: “Journalists only come when it stinks, they are just like flies.” Despised by politicians, journalists were in fact part of the same elite, always in a complicated relationship.

The journalist of the 21st century can no longer be part of this elite. Just like before he is a witness, a critical analyst and a gatekeeper providing access for people who have something to say. What is new is that journalists today more and more function as explorers, guides in structuring this enormous and ever-growing flow of information, a flow absolutely unprecedented in world history. Journalists can offer guidance, analysis, structure, questioning, not as part of the elite but as a part of all those very surprised and embarrassed citizens who do not really know what to think of this overwhelming flow and what to choose. This question is far from easy.

Now I talked about innovation and open society, let's look at the question whether we should share wealth and opportunities or whether we should struggle each for our own salvation. One of the first Internet providers in the Netherlands was called xs4all and I think this is a modern translation of solidarity. Offering access is the key word today, access for all to energy, education, health and information. Sharing at least a minimum of these is essential if you think human capital should get the chance to develop itself. And if you want to survive the next century, you need to develop every single bit of human capital you can find. Not oil, but human capital is the only source of added value nowadays.



Thijs Berman



Photo © Maarten van den Haak

Thijs Berman: "The time of handing out press cards to a selected elite is over."

This new role of guidance requires journalists to be of extremely high quality. You cannot be a guide in an unknown world if you don't know what anchors you have. So we need very thorough training of journalists. Boards of editors should allow themselves to take the time to analyse, to think and to hesitate. Because there are many threats to quality. Not only commerce or financial interests are threats to good journalism, also vertical media concentration from production to distribution of information.

And what about the Internet, is that a threat? I am not afraid of the Internet at all, I think it will only improve quality because it offers and supplies. I would not have survived the last decade as a journalist without mobile phones or the Internet, it's really a salvation. But you do have to redefine what makes a journalist, taking into account the profession has been democratized. The time of handing out press cards to a selected elite is over.

More than ever we need very active support for free media, for training, for funding, for advocacy, for protection. It is the duty of politicians to use their modest influence to support journalists. That's why I organised an event for the Algerian cartoonist Ali Dilem, who was threatened with up to 6 years imprisonment because of some interesting cartoons he made about the president. Fifty members of the European Parliament signed a long letter of protest and it worked, Dilem stayed out of prison. It did not work for Anna

Politkovskaya, we were only able to bring flowers to her grave. And still we don't do enough, we never do enough.

Some Dutch politicians say Muslim countries have no democracy. That makes me very angry, because I do not think that we in our arrogant West have ever invested in democrats in Muslim countries, we were just not interested. Our political stands and actions were driven by gas, oil and geostrategic interests. We supported the Muslim Brothers in Egypt to oust Nasser, to give just one example. A lot of our investments and support had nothing to do with democracy, all the more with power play. The arrogance that is shown by lamenting the amount of democracy is shameful, embarrassing and ignorant and we have to get rid of it as soon as possible. Instead of complaining, those people should support democrats in Muslim countries. I think the European Parliament can play a key role here, as European politicians are often more broad-minded and willing to reach out across party lines.

Thijs Berman worked as a correspondent in Moscow and Paris for a number of leading Dutch newspapers and magazines and for Dutch public radio. He is a Member of the European Parliament for the Dutch Labour Party, which elected him in December 2008 to lead the party in the upcoming European elections. Thijs Berman is vice-chairman of the European Development Committee. He's the living proof that there is life after journalism.

The five diseases of media

By Hisham Jaafar

The recent explosive increase in media messages has not resulted in more common intercultural understanding. Media help create stereotypes which curtail knowledge and simplify reality. In his speech Hisham Jaafar identifies five contributing mechanisms and sheds light on the role of new media.

1. Bad news as a selling point

Media are a product that has to be sold and promoted. Harmony and coordination are considered boring, while struggle and conflict draw attention. Because bad news sells, sometimes facts are presented in a certain way that distorts the image.

2. The lack of varied insightful commentary

There seems to be a community of analysts to comment on incidents. But how can a reporter have more diversity of sources to have things explained to him? Diversity benefits clear coverage and profound explanation of events. Sometimes there's not even time for explanation, especially when audiovisual techniques are being used. Without contacting various sources, without insights into historical and cultural backgrounds, we can end up in a state of complete ignorance, despite intensive coverage. I propose that we draw up a list of credible sources in the area, accessible to any reporter through the internet.

3. Stringers are strangers

Mostly, when an incident occurs, media channels send correspondents to cover the situation. However, they haven't spent a long time in the area and don't have a thorough understanding of what's really going on. So stringers are strangers.



Photo © Maarten van den Haak

Hisham Jaafar diagnoses five media diseases

Foreign correspondents should really live in a country. Their coverage will be more objective and realistic and they will be able to break the mould of stereotypes among their audience.

4. Media can aggravate crises

How should media deal with crises like the Danish cartoons and Fitna? I believe media should be cautious. The reactions to Danish cartoons were, in my opinion, not only culturally determined; we should take into account political circumstances in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and also the migrant situation in Europe. Also all the stakeholders competed with each other, everybody tried to take a stronger stand. Superficial reporting aggravates crises. At IslamOnline we debated and researched the best possible coverage and we came up with a media model to deal with crises.

5. Press as a secular religion

Religion has really been marginalized in both Western and Arabic media. Of course since 9/11 religion plays a more prominent role in coverage, but usually journalists lack the training and knowledge to fully understand

religious phenomena. Generalisation is taking place. While we might agree on basic values like democracy and the empowerment of women, we must remember that various possible models can and do exist in different countries regulating the role of religion in society.

New media potential cure

The new media can play a very important role in the combat against stereotyping and the professional diseases mentioned. The explosion of sources means we can easily find different stories covering one and the same incident. Media professionals must use those different stories to achieve balanced and credible coverage. The growth in media channels has led to fierce competition for audiences and a rising demand for professional journalists, making their scarcity an all the more urgent issue.

Hisham Jaafar is editor-in-chief of the Arabic website Islam Online, leading 50 employees and generating 500.000 page views a day. There's also an English section focussing on European Islam, a youth section and one dedicated to Qur'anic research.



The shattered shield of journalism

I'm a Palestinian, and not just any Palestinian, I'm a journalist. When I started at the age of 17, peace was still slightly alive. I thought we enjoyed the most press freedom in the Arab world with no regulations on what you could or could not say. Free to criticise even the president himself with no consequences but a phone call that usually ended up with a talk over a cup of coffee with high ranking officials. The new intifada in 2000 changed everything. Eventually three enemies of the press emerged.

"Don't touch my cameraman!"

By Faten Elwan

The Israeli army

The invasion of the West Bank restricted freedom of movement severely. The Israeli government decided to withdraw all press cards given to Palestinians. Without a card you can't cover any stories in an Israeli military zone. Each journalist was on his own, playing hide and seek with the Israeli army, until we decided to move together to face arrest collectively. It worked for a long time, until the Israeli government opted for direct attacks with sound bombs, rubber and even live bullets. The Israeli army became the first enemy of the press. Every accusation was deflected with the same argument: it's a war zone and the army is protecting its country.

Me and my crew were told the same thing on the 7th of June when we tried to cover the invasion and curfew of Naleen village. When we refused to leave, soldiers chased us and sound bombs rained down on us, sound bombs that shake your whole body and keep you deaf for days. I decided to stand up to a soldier who tried to stop me doing an interview with an eyewitness. I was arrested and convicted for assaulting the soldier and trying to steal his weapon...

Mr. Anonymous

A new style of restraining freedom of the press appeared in 2006 when Mahmud Abbas allowed Hamas to compete in the elections. They won. The international community didn't like this victory, nor did the Fatah leadership. Journalists reported that Fatah lost because of corruption. They were

punished by "Mr. Anonymous". Disguised Palestinian gunmen attacked the journalists and their offices.

Fighting brothers

Finally, the worst violations were committed by Palestinians, when journalists got stuck in the middle of the fight between the brothers Fatah and Hamas. In Gaza journalists covering Hamas actions were kidnapped, arrested and beaten up. Offices were shut down and the three major newspapers in Palestine were not allowed to enter Gaza. The Palestinian Authority on the West Bank responded by arresting journalists regarded as Islamic and by shutting down radio stations. Criticising the Palestinian government became a high-risk mission. In Gaza many journalists had to leave or die! Most of them left, the rest decided to apply self-censorship. The truth was controlled by fear.

Shattered shield

After ten years I realised that the shield I always held proudly, the shield of journalism, was only a nice memory from the past. It was shattered by the three enemies of the press: the Israeli army, Mr. Anonymous and the brothers who turned against each other. Fact is that press is not a byword for immunity anymore.

Faten Elwan is a well-known Palestinian journalist. After hosting her own talk show, she became correspondent for Al-Hurra TV.



Stills from footage shot by Faten Elwan and her crew

Do we belong to one planet?

Changing media culture and the universal struggle for quality

Osama al-Sharif: "Arab media will have to chart their own way."

"They are people just like us", is a well-known phrase. Osama al-Sharif agrees but is hasty to add that we don't live on the same planet. The veteran journalist from Jordan shares his views on media evolution, safeguarding good journalism and the possible relationship with the Western press.

We all belong to a media culture that is continuously changing. I have been in this business for as long as I remember. I can still smell the ink of the old metal press in Jerusalem. I remember my father coming home with a black-and-white television. It's only 50 years ago that television made its first appearance.

First as a form of light entertainment, later on as a serious source of news and information. Thirty years ago CNN was founded, the mother of the 24-hour news channels. And 15 years ago the world was introduced to Yahoo.com, arguably the first multi-lingual online portal. The Internet age had begun in earnest and the world had become truly wired. Recently the explosive proliferation of satellite TV broke the government's monopoly on information in our part of the world. The last 6 to 7 years blogs have been appearing - giving a boost to the concept of citizen journalism.

In between all these wonderful means of delivering pictures, sounds, data and words, journalism was going through a tumultuous evolution. In the universal

struggle for good journalism, we are more united than ever. Cultural, political, religious and economic differences set aside, journalists across the globe are striving to fulfil the same goals. We want to be better practitioners of this profession. We want to be part of a professional culture that espouses freedom, transparency, and accountability, and strives to achieve it through objectivity, accuracy, independence and thoroughness.

But that's in a perfect world. We should be learning from each other at this conference. The West being the traditional bedrock of democratic values, free press and personal liberties, seems the perfect source for knowledge. As journalists of the developing world and emerging economies attempt to push the bar a little higher, we still look at the West for inspiration and funding. It's we who bring the questions to you. How can we learn from you so that some of us can lead and become mentors to a younger generation of Arab journalists? How can you help us to avoid falling into the traps of subjectivity, inaccuracy and the false dissemination of news? I ask those questions because I have doubts about the future of such a relationship.

I am the first to admit that we need to learn and that we are struggling to save good journalism in a fast-changing environment. Hundreds of satellite channels, tens of thousands of bloggers and millions of mobile handsets have changed our media scene in the past decade beyond recognition. We are battling with ethical issues, suffering from ailments such as subjective and unfair coverage of issues, incursions on

the private lives of citizens, government manipulation, intimidation of journalists and the concentration of media assets into few hands. We also have journalists who have succumbed to government pressures and betrayed the values of their profession.

However, when we look for inspiration from your side, we are shocked to see that our likely role models are also guilty of different sins and are liable to be confronted with pitfalls. Especially the last eight years we have seen departures from those universal values. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have pointed out major flaws in Western media coverage. We have seen few examples of objective, transparent and fair coverage. Mavericks who challenged the norm were an exception. The same goes for media coverage of the Palestinian issue, Islam and religious fundamentalism among others.

We now realise that as much as we agree on basic journalistic values, we may differ on the best ways to implement them. At the end of the day, we will have to chart our own way and create our own path in our attempt to reach those goals. But that path may not lead to the same reality that you have in the West today. In fact it will certainly be different.

Your secular journey has gone hand in hand with democratic progress and the development of press freedom, almost interchangeably. We in the Arab world and to a large extent in the Muslim world, cannot blindly copy your experiment without colliding head-on with cultural and religious taboos. Let me mention two examples. First of all pornography is an accepted form of freedom of expression in your culture, in ours it can never be. The second example is the recent offence against our prophet and religious symbols, initiated by Danish media in the name of press freedom, which has enraged millions of Muslims. As someone educated in the West, I can appreciate the logic that drives publishers to satirise religion. But I also understand the deep-seated revulsions that drove many in the Muslim world to protest against such offences. I cannot imagine a period in

my own life-time in which our media could cross that red line and engage in lampooning religious symbols.

We are not free of bigotry ourselves, our media culture is suffering from numerous faults, some of them translate into our perception of our own and other people's place in the globalised world. Mainstream media are losing influence to personalised media and interpersonal communication. As much as our world is wired today, we fail to understand each other. Meanwhile, the old problems continue to haunt us:

bigotries so that we can write a fair article or news report? How much have we managed to understand ourselves so we can teach others about what makes us different and similar at the same time? We have to seek ways to build a bridge that ensures a fair perception of each other, a fair understanding of each other's value system and a fair appreciation of the differences that make us unique, so we can truly belong to one planet.



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The world has become truly wired.

Lack of training of young journalists; social and political pressures; absence of positive mentoring by veteran editors; and a consumer culture that embodies the worst of the capitalist system. Most of all, we miss encounters where we can exchange experiences and attempt to push the learning curve up for both sides. The question is this: How can we, journalists on both sides, neutralise our

Osama al-Sharif is a veteran Jordanian journalist with a long and fruitful career. For example, he co-founded the Arab publishing company in the nineties, a pioneer in pan-Arab magazines. For a long time he was editor-in-chief of Jordan's oldest daily *ad-Dustour*, today he is a freelance writer.



Maxime Verhagen:
"Free press is a pillar
of democratic society."

Journalism: a mission for a freer world

By His Excellency Maxime Verhagen – Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs

Today it only takes a split second to get an update on the latest news from around the globe, simply by switching on your mobile phone or connecting to the world wide web.

News is everywhere and more widely available than ever before. It has become a commodity, whose sale and distribution can generate substantial profits. Today's multimedia information society provides any number of new trends and virtual platforms, such as the blogosphere, YouTube and Wikipedia - to mention only a few.

More traditional communications media - newspapers, television and radio - are no longer the main sources of news. The rapid public availability of facts, images and sound through the internet and mobile phone networks is having a far-reaching impact on fact-finding, reporting and news analysis.

Within this new framework of information-gathering, I think journalists have no choice but to become information brokers and interpreters rather than sticking to their more traditional role as messengers with a monopoly on news supply. Your value today lies in producing order from the abundance of information and images in our societies.

In my view, the quality of journalism in a given

country reflects the extent and effectiveness of its democracy. Daily newspapers emerged in the nineteenth century because active citizens wanted to make their voices heard and express their ideas. A free press is a pillar of a democratic society. People need to be well informed to cast their votes wisely and responsibly.

Journalism is the bearer of a democratic debate in which citizens have a fundamental right to be informed and to participate. Only then we can speak of informed citizenship and participatory democracy, which are essential aspects of today's society. Media diversity is key to healthy, balanced public debate.

Press freedom is a catalyst for other human rights.



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A healthy democracy depends on its citizens, whose ideas should be reflected by pluralist media. Policies should not be sold to the public by government-controlled media. If that happens, the messenger is determining the content of the message.

The Dutch government strongly defends freedom of expression - including press freedom and freedom of access to information - as a fundamental human right. It is also central to the protection of other human rights. Because freedom of expression allows people to demand other human rights, such as justice, equality before the law and freedom of religion or belief. Without freedom of expression, these other freedoms cannot be properly exercised. Moreover, freedom of expression makes electoral democracy meaningful, builds public trust in government, and strengthens mechanisms for holding governments accountable.



Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Verhagen (r) and Free Voice director Bart Dijkstra (l).

So we go to great lengths to defend freedom of expression, even when it is used to express views that are controversial. However, freedom of expression is not a licence to insult other people at will. It carries with it a responsibility to consider the consequences of one's words, as explicitly stated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

I would like to stress that tradition, culture or religion may never be used to justify undermining, still less violating, human rights, including freedom of expression. Nor may the right to freedom of religion or belief be eroded

Mr. Maxime Verhagen is the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs. Since many years he is a member of the Supervisory Board of Free Voice. He delivered this speech at the concluding dinner of the conference "Better Journalism. More Freedom" on the 7th of September 2008 in The Hague.

- meaning not only the freedom to profess one's beliefs, but also the obligation to respect the religious or philosophical convictions of others.

A decline in freedom of the press is a warning sign that restrictions on other freedoms may soon follow. Conversely, an increase in press freedom is a catalyst for the advancement of other human rights. For example, to improve the human rights situation in a country, it is crucial that human rights defenders be able to speak their minds freely.

Unfortunately, global press freedom suffered a clear decline in 2007, as Freedom House showed in its most recent survey. The decline continues a six-year negative trend. Journalists are struggling to work in increasingly hostile environments in almost every region of the world.

One trend that has restricted media freedom is the adoption of laws that are used to punish critical journalists. I know that some of your colleagues have been arrested because they had the courage to report on issues in ways that displeased your governments. So I am glad that the training programme 'Investing in the Future' is helping to increase journalists' legal awareness and their knowledge of international human rights standards with regard to media legislation, freedom of expression and legal safeguards.

Fortunately, the Freedom House report showed some improvement in the region with the least press freedom: the Middle East and North Africa. A growing number of journalists in this region are willing to challenge government restrictions and to push the boundaries. Egyptian journalists in particular showed an increased willingness to cross red lines, thus moving their country from Freedom House's 'Not Free' category to its 'Partly Free' category.

I congratulate Free Voice and CDFJ on successfully completing the first phase of their programme 'Investing in the Future'. I applaud you all for your courage and commitment in difficult circumstances. For you, journalism is not merely a career - it is a mission. A mission to pursue the truth, to break taboos, to reflect the world in which we live. Last but certainly not least, it is a mission to work for a freer world, in which everyone is entitled to express his or her thoughts and ideas. As a strong supporter of this mission, I encourage you to keep the debate on journalism and press freedom alive.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Thijs Berman
Dutch politician and Member of
the European Parliament
The Netherlands

Thomas Bruning
Executive Secretary of the Dutch
Association of Journalists (NVJ)
The Netherlands

Nidal Mansour
President of the Center
Defending Freedom of Journalists
(CDFJ) - Jordan

Hassan Rachidi
Rabat Bureau Chief, Al Jazeera
Morocco

Hans Verploeg
Chairman of the Board of Free
Voice - The Netherlands

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Mayor of The Hague

A.G. Koenders
Minister of Development
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Chairperson (Speaker) of the
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M.J.M. Verhagen
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Fadia Dallah
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Faten Elwan
Al Hurra TV - Palestine

Hisham Jaafar
Islam Online - Egypt

Sameer Al Hiari
Ammon News Agency Website -
Jordan

Nurul Kabir
New Age (English daily)
Bangladesh

Marleen Khalifa
Al Safir Newspaper - Lebanon

Hassan Rachidi
Rabat Bureau Chief, Al Jazeera
Morocco

Abeer Saady
Egyptian Journalists Syndicate / Al
Akhbar Newspaper - Egypt

Osama Al Sharif
Ad-Dustour Newspaper - Jordan

Khalil Al Shobali
Nesa'a Men Al Mughrib (Women
from Morocco) Magazine -
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Gerdi Verbeet at the Dutch Parliament.

Photo © Waarten van den Heek

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Bertus Hendriks
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Mark Aardenburg
Cameraman/video & producer

Jorrit Bosma
Conference reporter

Maarten van der Haak
Photographer

Note: Please take into consideration this list is not exhaustive.





Photo © Maarten van den Heek

Ehab Sallam: "We must realise freedom of the press entails responsibilities."

Between opinion and offence

Walking a tight rope in the Middle East

By Jan Pieter Nepveu

Journalists in the Middle East have little awareness of their rights and duties. This is why Free Voice trains local lawyers in media law. Egyptian lawyer Ehab Sallam coordinates this legal programme.

"I live in my suitcase," Ehab Sallam jokes, when he puts down his suitcase in the Grand café of Amsterdam Central Station after attending the Free Voice conference. In Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain and Yemen, Free Voice provides training for lawyers in order to give them guidance in the field of media law. The legal principles in these six countries are roughly the same. Sallam commutes to and fro all the time.

Unnecessary conflicts

In their quest for freedom, journalists may easily come into conflict with their governments. Governments in the Middle East are powerful and opposition has been silenced. This is why anyone striving for more democracy, is particularly dependent on judges.

The number of court cases against journalists in the Middle East is substantial. "In Egypt alone, there are thousands of these every year", says Sallam. It is not always the government that is responsible for the conflicts. Often Arab journalists are insufficiently aware of their duties. The realisation is lacking that freedom of the press entails responsibilities. This absence of legal awareness leads to conflicts which are not always necessary. Journalists in the Middle East are relatively often guilty of slander and insults. Sallam: "You just cannot write down all kinds of unfounded insinuations."

Crossed the boundary

Lawyers in the Legal Programme of Free Voice are trained in conducting workshops for journalists concerning issues of media law and freedom of the press. "We are building a network of lawyers, so that a journalist who gets into trouble, may be referred to a specialised lawyer", says Petrus

Schothorst, coordinator of the umbrella training programme Investing in the Future. "We point out the margins, so journalists will not have to get into trouble. But if an article of law is vague, or can be interpreted in more than one way, then we encourage journalists to provoke legal proceedings and elicit a judgment."

A well-known case is that of Ibrahim Eise, editor-in chief of the Egyptian paper Al Dustour. The paper ran a publication concerning the president's ill health. Schothorst: "In Egypt this is dangerous, you may be charged with jeopardising the country's stability."

A trial may be useful to try and stretch regulations. But according to Sallam, Eise unfortunately has gone too far. On the front page he published a cartoon depicting the future grave of the president. "That's not an opinion, but an insult; especially in Egypt it is not done to wish someone dead. He should really have restricted himself to: "The president is ill, what's to become of our country?" In that case we might have been able to stretch the freedom of the press a little further. Now the editor is making things difficult for everyone. "

This is, however, not a reason for Sallam or Free Voice to abandon the paper. "In any case we oppose a jail sentence for a journalist because of his opinion." So Sallam will presently return to Schiphol by train to fly to the Middle East, in order to devote himself to the training programme and cases like this one.

Earlier published in the [Advocatenblad](#). ([Lawyers' Journal](#)).

Abeer Saady reflects on her career:

“I wanted to be a newspaper”

By Hassnae Bouazza



Abeer Saady, a career woman with a traditional heart.

1979: the schoolmistress in the First form asked her pupils what they wanted to be later in life. A small girl replied that, later, when she was grown up, she would like to be to be a newspaper. Giggles in class. The girl, saddened, left the room. The teacher followed her and said a few comforting words to her.

“You meant that you want to be a journalist?”
 “No, I want to be a newspaper.” The teacher explained that this was not possible, but then the girl told her that her mummy and daddy occasionally did not play with her because they were reading the paper. And as she wanted her parents to pay full attention to her and give her all the time she wanted, she wanted to be a newspaper. Her parents would then devote all their time and attention to her, rather than to the paper.

2008: The girl has developed into the deputy-editor foreign affairs and column writer of the Egyptian newspaper Al Akhbar. Abeer Saady is a

successful journalist who has specialised in many varied fields and writes with the same ease about Islamic society as about technical subjects, such as the construction of a new metro network in Cairo.

Now that Abeer has made her dream come true and has distinguished herself

as a professional journalist, she wants to give the new generation of colleagues an opportunity to develop within the profession by organising training sessions, so that they will be given the guidance and feedback that is still not available: “We do have good journalists, but no trainers.” Abeer herself has learned a great deal from the courses she has followed at Free Voice. She followed the first course in Jordan and later she attended other courses in various Arab countries.

She picked up a lot of knowledge and ideas and met fellow-journalists there.

She tells of an experience she had in New York, where she reported on a large demonstration. At a given moment one of the demonstrators came up to her and broke her jaw. During a later course she learned how to protect her own safety; this lesson took her back to the moment in New York: if, at the time, she had known how to react in such a situation. she could have defended herself better and avoid a broken jaw.

Everything she has learned thus far, all her experiences, combined with those of her colleagues, is something she wants to pass on the new generation of journalists so that the level and the quality of journalism can be improved. The question is how high this level can be if the freedom of the press is under threat in the Arab countries. Abeer believes that it is important for journalists to be able to expose abuses and corruption, thus opening up discussion; once that has succeeded, democratisation will follow automatically.

Moreover, she feels that freedom of the press goes hand in hand with responsibility and that the distinction between bloggers who dominate the internet and who - until recently - were able to escape the government’s clutches, and journalists is that the latter deal responsibly and professionally with information.

At present Abeer is a very enthusiastic member of the board of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate, the first woman in eight years to be elected. She takes this sign of trust and the responsibility it entails very seriously. She spends all her time working; she has not yet reached the stage of starting a family. It seems to be the inevitable price which many Arab career women have to pay for their ambitions, but Abeer is optimistic. She makes it quite clear that love cannot be enforced, but should she meet the right person, someone with respect for her professional dedication, she will not hesitate to join him in matrimony. In the end she believes that you have succeeded in life only when you have started a family. Abeer turns out to be a fast career woman with a traditional heart.



The tables are turned: journalist Abeer Saady is interviewed herself.

Printed media won't take Caesar's choice

By Abeer Saady



Photo © Maarten van den Haak

Abeer Saady: "We are journalist by profession!"

When Julius Caesar was asked how he would like to die, he answered: "Suddenly". He realized that waiting for death is worse than death itself. For us, journalists in printed media, we face serious challenges that threaten our existence. Our choice shouldn't be between ways to die but methods to survive.

We have witnessed the internet finding its way into Egypt with slow, but confident steps. It began as an elite virtual club, that broadened to become the tool of the young generation to express themselves freely. In the internet they found an alternative medium addressing their needs neglected by newspapers for so long.

More than 12 thousand Egyptian blogs do exist on the internet. Starting as personal voices, blogs turned to be a real new medium with a participating audience. Activists and passionate young Egyptians dreaming of change used their sites and blogs to call demonstrators to convene, publish funny cartoons of corrupted officials, etc. Some people see bloggers as heroes, comparing the impact of blogs

with the revolutionary cassette speeches of the past.

Few years ago, no one expected internet would threaten printed journalism, which survived many previous challenges like radio and television.

Nowadays, there are two main attitudes concerning the future of print media. One suggests even greater opportunities for electronic journalism and personal media, resulting in the end of the newspaper and mass media.

The other view emphasizes no medium is capable of erasing another. Competition depends on the medium's capability to improve and renovate itself. Egyptian printed media would survive only if they were able to face certain challenges and to stress their points of power.

Printed media are trying to implement new functions and technologies.

Interviewing via email, Voice over IP, or Chat rooms are examples. Interactive communication between the journalist and his audience is a powerful tool. Writers put their emails at the end of their articles for feedback. We need to train journalists in printed media to improve their technological skills, because a gap still exists between old and new media.

Specialisation and new content are other options for the future. Addressing the readers' needs is essential for survival. The speed of internet for hard news facts can't be beaten by printed media. In-depth coverage should be the focus, bringing the news behind the news. Independent newspapers who did so have increased their audience.

It is important to remember 'print' journalists have a crucial advantage over bloggers: they are journalists by profession. They know the professional rules and ethics. The printed word still holds more credibility, electronic newspapers are considering "opposite immigration" to issue printed versions. Some of the Egyptian newspapers are trying to fight the new media on the internet itself. At first newspapers' websites were just an electronic copy. But they are developing to contain more services. Some researchers suggest convergence between the printed and electronic media. Online media also became sources for news stories and platforms for debates on sensitive issues, like the famous clips showing police torture in Egypt.

However, even the internet is not a safe haven, as became clear when police used Emergency Law to set up a specialised net unit to target bloggers. In the end there is one important battle that binds all Egyptian journalists of every medium: Freedom of expression.

Abeer Saady works for the Egyptian newspaper al-Akhbar and is a board member of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate. She has been an enthusiastic Free Voice trainee and is now cooperating to further improve the training programme. ■

Free media as a development mechanism



Minister Bert Koenders exchanges views with leading Arab journalists.

Dutch minister of Development Cooperation Bert Koenders warmly welcomed the international conference guests to his office to discuss the importance of media support and its potential pitfalls.

The press is one of the most vital parts of society. All over the world we are constantly debating the role of the press. Freedom of the press is a key element in international relations. Human development means more than growth of jobs, it's also growth of cultural space and its expression. Proper reporting and journalistic training are crucial elements in opening up societies in a way that shows familiarity with the local situation. It is important to support the press around the world, whilst remaining neutral of course.

I might agree or not agree with you, that is absolutely irrelevant. What is relevant is that you can write what you want to write, in itself an important development mechanism."

Hisham Jaffar, editor-in-chief of IslamOnline, asks about the criteria for cooperation. "It is obvious that European countries are following up democratic reforms in the area. Training journalists is positive, but are political and economical reforms really taking place? I believe reforms start from the will of the people living in the area, you have to reach them if you want to get results. Projects should be close to those people and take into account their priorities, not European ones, otherwise projects will have a limited effect."

Bert Koenders responds: "It's an extremely difficult question, but I am

glad you asked. In my view we have lost quite a bit of progress the last couple of years. Especially after the Iraq war the West has been depicted as employing double standards and I think that's correct to some extent. Secondly, relationships between Europe and the Middle East are seen as being more based on stability than on freedom of the press and democracy. This agenda does exist, although it is not as dominant as you might think, and I disagree with it completely. It's not up to us to prescribe what's good for you, that's absolutely a non-starter. But the issue of press freedom can unite people instead of divide them, and we have to unite again. And it's true, there is a certain risk that the programs we are supporting are intended for a very small elite, often seen as western. The result can be stigma instead of progress. Besides, it's difficult to work on freedom of expression in many countries if you consider the very negative reports on freedom. And I know that you are not just standing on the sideline, but you are constantly in the thick of it. And that's why I think the media field has expanded to the Internet and the blogosphere. Still, in a way you are always training an elite, supporting people who have the courage and show the leadership to act. Besides, the problem of elitism is a worldwide phenomenon, many people don't feel represented by their own press and politics. So the difficult challenge of fighting for freedom of expression is to find and support those courageous leaders, while ensuring at the same time they are not regarded as only the 'elite'. It seems to me this is what you are trying to achieve in some form, in all modesty of course, in all these programs and projects. And I believe this is very important." [JB]

The aborted dream of Hassan Rachidi

Founding the Moroccan al-Jazeera office in Rabat made his dream come true, but it became a nightmare. The authorities withdrew his press accreditation in June and he is currently facing trial on the accusation of deliberately spreading false news on riots in Sidi Ifni. Hassan Rachidi talks about the charges, his professional ethics and the media situation in Morocco in general.

Positive moves made by King Mohammed VI since 1999 seemed to usher in a new era in Morocco. The King encouraged young journalists, allowing them to start their own newspapers. The margin of freedom of expression became the widest in the region. Like many others, al-Jazeera made use of this new atmosphere. In 1999, 2001 and 2002 I approached the new rulers on behalf of al-Jazeera and in 2004 the Moroccan government allowed us to set up an office in Rabat. This was of huge significance to the Maghreb region, which was underreported up till that moment. People were accustomed to tune into foreign news outlets for news from their own country. In November 2006 we started worldwide broadcast on al-Jazeera of a one-hour-long Maghreb bulletin. In a very short time it became very popular among viewers in the Maghreb and the Arab community in Europe. It lifted a media ban for many. We were able to give a voice to people from the radical left, liberals and islamists, who were prohibited to have their say on official TV where only progovernment opinions could be heard. At the same time we gave the governments a chance to react.

However, this dream did not last long. The first punch came during the September 2007 elections when the government accused us of supporting islamists and giving them more air time. This was a silly accusation, islamists ended up in third place in our top air time list. Besides it is my duty to cover them like any other newsmaker. How can I play along with the game of government dominated information and ban people? How can I take myself serious as a professional reporter? We work according to the principle of opinion and counter opinion, showing different sides of a story.



Hassan Rachidi: "The media situation in Morocco is going backwards."

We applied those same journalistic principles to the riots in Sidi Ifni, a port town in the South of Morocco facing socio-economic hardship. Youngsters blocked the port, protesting marginalisation by a government which broke earlier promises of starting up development programs. The blockade lasted ten days and was ended brutally on the 7th of June 2008 by thousands of security troops.

Al-Jazeera live coverage and broadcasts were already banned a month before. All I could do was receive information, verify my sources and pass the information in its raw state to my viewers. It's up to them to judge. The 7th of June my telephone awoke me, it was human rights activist Ibrahim al-Layl alerting me about the riots. Three press releases at the office from different sources all mentioned violent clashes and a death toll between 4 to 10. My contacts in Sidi Ifni confirmed this information. I finally succeeded mobilising a government source, who was "informed but not authorized" - two very different things in Morocco. He confirmed the confrontations, but stated there were no deaths. In our first news broadcast we quoted human rights and government sources, reporting both sides of the story. I was arrested and stripped of my press

accreditation. I was interrogated for more than 13 hours. Somebody who has carried out a coup d'état should be undergoing such a trial, not a reporter. Of course, I was found guilty, a small guy like me cannot confront the government. There was an appeal and the trial might carry on indefinitely. Ibrahim al-Layl is awaiting his trial in prison. I may face up to a year in prison and a fine of 5.000 euros. In the meantime, I cannot practice my profession.

I cannot accept this trial, I refuse to admit I made a professional error because that is absolutely not true. I reported objectively and professionally, quoting several sources among whom the authorities. The information was

I was arrested and stripped of my press accreditation.

balanced. The authorities think our Sidi Ifni coverage was revenge by al-Jazeera for the ban on live coverage. Al-Jazeera, on the other hand, believes the government repression means that its method of showing all sides of a story is no longer tolerated.

The al-Jazeera experience in Morocco was really a dream come true for me, now it has been aborted. The media

situation in Morocco is going backwards. I know young talented journalists who sold their houses to start up independent newspapers. Now they are forced to pay huge fines causing them to go bankrupt. One fine was 600.000 dollars. It's economic power play, a mercy bullet to shut them down.

In such an undemocratic atmosphere it's hard to talk about independent press, but we should not be too pessimistic. We can try to stretch the limits of freedom, using media as a weapon to speed up the so-called transition. However, journalists should not become just militants fighting the system. We must never go against our own principles, but always act

according to our professional standards. It's crucial to train the many talented young journalists to facilitate change. They need training and internships, especially in

the field of audiovisual media. They need you, European colleagues, to share your knowledge and skills and bridge the gap between Arab and Western media. [JB]

Based on the speech Hassan Rachidi delivered at the Free Voice Conference (09-09-2008) and a public interview conducted by Bertus Hendriks (25-09-2008).

Petition of support for Hassan Rachidi

"The Dutch, Arab and Asian journalists and other participants in the international conference Better Journalism - More Freedom, organized by Free Voice in The Hague, The Netherlands on 8 and 9 September, want to express their support for Mr. Hassan Rachidi, Bureau chief of Al Jazeera in Morocco.

They are convinced that Mr. Rachidi in the reporting he has done on the events in Sidi Ifni on the 7th of June 2008 has respected the international journalistic standards as can be expected from a well experienced and professional journalist. As a consequence we consider that the accusations brought against this colleague in the trial in which he is now involved are misguided and should be withdrawn."



Colleagues express their support for Hassan Rachidi.

Defending the profession

By Thomas Bruning

The main goal of our union is to keep the professional journalists working in the best possible conditions: independent, with free access to information and with the freedom to publish, well-paid, in a safe position and aware of their rights and responsibilities. I will focus on a classical threat to free media: state interference.

In the fifties the Dutch government wanted to introduce a special law concerning decent media work. The media community prevented this law by setting up a self-regulating journalistic council. Citizens who feel mistreated by media coverage can ask this council to pass an independent judgement, thus avoiding an expensive legal procedure. Besides the council we started the Media Debate Foundation, where public and journalists debate on the Danish cartoons, coverage of suicide cases and privacy issues for example.

In accepting our responsibility towards the public by creating accessible ways to complain and discuss the media, we have managed to avoid state interference in the media profession up till this moment.

However, it is possible to sue media for damages and rectification because of incorrect or offending articles. Luckily enough, Dutch courts are cautious when it comes to media, realising their special role. Media should get enough freedom, otherwise democratic society itself is at stake. Critical stories are a necessity for open debate.

I am glad to say there have been no heavy censorship cases. But the extent of freedom is measured by its last incident. And incidents do occur in the Netherlands. In its fight against crime and terrorism, the government extended possibilities to tap phones and monitor computers and exchange of data.

Serious investigation and coverage of the government and its agencies is impossible, if those same agencies secretly monitor journalists and their anonymous sources. Investigated misbehaviour can be

adjusted before exposure and what's even worse, confidential sources can be uncovered. I will describe two important incidents. Two journalists from the biggest Dutch daily *De Telegraaf* discovered top secret material from the secret service circulating among criminal networks. After publication the reporters were being tapped and followed. The Dutch court condemned this particular case, we hope the European court will condemn these practices in general.

The other case occurred 8 years ago, when *Spits* reporter Koen Voskuil was imprisoned for 12 days to force him to reveal his sources within the police, who told him about an unlawful set-up of evidence in the house of an arms dealer. Voskuil had promised secrecy and refused to cooperate. Court approval of his imprisonment caused a big stir in Dutch media circles. We took the case to European court, which ruled serious mistakes had been made. Those mistakes sent a very negative signal to potential sources at vulnerable places, such as police, government and intelligence organisations.

In fact the only way to have public control over these kind of organisations is the use of anonymous sources, who must have absolute certainty they won't be exposed.



Thomas Bruning: "Freedom is measured by its last incident."

I am happy to say the court rulings led to the announcement of a law protecting the sources of journalists. Our association is being consulted for the first draft.

In the Netherlands free press is highly valued and common practice, but we have to monitor it everyday. Only then we can permit ourselves to say anything at all about press freedom abroad.

Thomas Bruning is executive secretary of NVJ, the Dutch Association of Journalists.

Nidal Mansour: The positively anxious

By Rita Barotta

Nidal Mansour is the President of the Centre for Defending Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ) in Jordan. Before becoming a tireless activist for press freedom, he was a prominent journalist himself. Menassat star writer Rita Barotta discovers more about his achievements, his motivation and his famous temper.

Photo © Maarten van den Haak

Nidal Mansour (right) and Hassan Rachidi climb the rostrum of Dutch Parliament.

-Don't you miss being a journalist? It's been quite some time now that you have been dealing with press freedom issues, without being able to write.

I own a weekly newspaper, *Al Hadath*. I haven't really stopped being a journalist. At least I'm still a columnist that happens to have stopped writing this particular column, for almost a year now. I stopped writing because of the media scene in Jordan, especially the political alignments there.

Now I'm trying to express myself through the centre by giving help to journalists, hoping we can have an independent and more professional press one day.

-And what have you achieved through this centre?

I can humbly say that throughout the past 10 years, we have changed a lot in the profession. The training of the journalists we are providing with the collaboration

of Free Voice is not a curriculum, but a methodology. Now we have a complete system in place.

We are the first to have installed the concept of legal protection. What we consider most important is that a journalist can feel protected and surrounded by people that work for his rights.

This step is still nothing, if you realise that the entire media in the Arab world are being targeted as we speak.

-What is really happening today in Jordan, with the interference of the King, to help out the journalists?

I really don't ask for any governmental support. This is not what we need. I just want the government to stay out of our issues. The government always had its own ways to prevent us from getting information. I just want it to respect the press.

Frankly, I don't see the day is near when the government will understand this.

-Some people complain about your temper!

Of course, I am very anxious and ambitious, especially about work. But this anxiety is positive. I want to achieve things by my standards.

When it comes to work, I don't believe in compromises. I am very determined and "sticky". I might follow a journalist home, in the middle of the night, just to check if he is doing what he is supposed to do.

And I know that it's not easy to work with me. When I travel, a lot of my co-workers never feel that I am not with them.

And I might get really angry, if work is not done, or not done on time.

I believe in commitment as a virtue. I've been working in the media field since 1984, and I never remember being late for any meeting.

CDFJ is a non-government organization, committed to defending the freedom and security of journalists through addressing the violations to which they are exposed and building sustainable professional capacities as well as enabling them to have free access to information, along with developing and changing restrictive media related legislations. CDFJ was established in 1999 and is based in Amman, Jordan. More information on: www.cdfj.org

Menassat: the digital platform for news, trends and media

By Lejo Siepe

BEURUT - "There are more websites than just this one on freedom of the press in the Arab world. However, most of them have been created from a Western perspective. We work exclusively with Arab journalists, who have difficulties publishing their material because of censorship or restricted press freedom. We offer them a platform", says Belgian journalist Gert van Langendonck, cofounder of www.menassat.com. In September 2007 he and Lebanese photographer-journalist Samer Mohdad started this digital platform. Van Langendonck was a journalist for the Belgian daily *De Morgen* (The morning) before moving to Beirut to cover the Middle East for various Western media. Right now he dedicates himself to the development of Menassat.

Menassat, meaning 'platforms' in Arabic, is based in Beirut. Of old, Lebanon is a country in the Arab world where media have a little more freedom of movement than elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. "However, it would be an inappropriate choice of words to call it press freedom, because also in Lebanon political parties control newspapers, radio and TV stations. Lebanon is extremely politicised and this is reflected in media", says Van Langendonck. "Over here, journalists are working for political parties like soldiers at a front. Usually they aren't objective observers applying the principles of adversarial hearing, check/double-check and balanced reporting. Journalism in countries like Syria and Egypt boils down to the same thing." Arab journalists whose press freedom is limited a bit too often in their own countries can call on Menassat to publish their articles and photographs. "We are working with a network of correspondents spanning 22 countries. Around 50% of them are bloggers, the other half journalists."

Bloggers

Especially in Egypt bloggers play a key role. "It's bloggers who are taking risks nowadays. Journalists often apply self-censorship. In most countries they know exactly what they can and cannot write about. Occasionally the rules are altered and someone ends up in prison, but most of the time journalists do observe the unwritten rules. You have to be able to read between the lines." The bloggers are the ones breaking free of this pattern, writing down truthfully what they observe. "However, we do check all the information before publishing it on the site", stresses Van Langendonck.

Usually Arab journalists don't communicate with one another. Van Langendonck: "Journalists working in the Maghreb region for example, have little or no contact with Middle Eastern countries, while censorship and restrictions occur just as often." Syria for one, is a country restricting Menassat: the provider is blocking the site. "Still, we get a lot of positive response from Syrians who want to write for us, often on topics like censorship, media and activism."

Menassat intends to be a platform where Arab media professionals can offer and exchange views and information free of censorship and political or sectarian agendas. The objective is the promotion of freedom of expression throughout the Arab world. To achieve this Menassat - in co-operation with other organisations - is developing legal support. Support for journalists who are in danger and get into serious trouble with the strong arm of the law. "Lawyers are trained in the case law of freedom of speech."

Menassat is a bilingual website with the entire content available in both English and Arabic, receiving around 3000 hits per day from

around the globe. "We work in two directions: Westerners can form a better idea of the Arab media community and vice versa. There's a big difference between Arab and western journalism, which relates mainly to the mixture of opinion and facts. People here talk in very general terms, using difficult quotes from important officials. Relating a story to a real person is far from common practice. At Menassat we try to find a language in the middle, between Arabic and English." Van Langendonck is not satisfied until Menassat attracts 40.000 visitors a day.

Free Voice

Through its platform, Menassat tries to get a debate up and running and to raise journalistic standards in the Arab world. The site constitutes the digital service hatch of Investing in the Future, a program launched by Free Voice and the Centre for Defending Freedom of Journalists. Free Voice is devoted to increasing press freedom and the free flow of information in Third World countries. To achieve this goal, the Investing in the Future program offers training sessions in the Middle East on a regular basis. Arab journalists learn how to write a feature on a certain topic, using common journalistic standards: adversarial hearing; study of primary sources; reflecting correctly what has been said; and reporting objectively, independently and without bias.

Freedom of speech

Writing such a feature can turn out to be a pretty difficult assignment, as became clear last summer during a workshop with around 20 Lebanese

journalists from various Lebanese newspapers, radio and TV stations participating. The workshop was led by Froukje Santing, who used to write for the quality Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, and Free Voice trainer Petrus Schothorst. The participants had to write a story on child labour. During the evaluation, journalists acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining the correct information on good authority. Little could be expected from the government and the journalists were mostly dependent on information coming from NGOs. Besides this external problem, they lacked the necessary skills to make proper inquiries. However, Western funding of a workshop to learn those techniques was seen by some Lebanese journalists as a shame. The country itself - in this case Lebanon - should be organising and financing this kind of trainings, they argued. On the other hand participants admitted sectarianism in Lebanon still influenced the level of freedom of speech. "There is little self-reflection among Arab journalists", observes Lebanese photographer and Menassat cofounder Samer Mohdad, "we need more self-criticism."

He hopes Investing in the Future will change journalists' attitudes, but there's still a long way to go. Anyhow, Menassat wants to contribute its bit to a more democratic and open society. "We need our intellect to reach citizens, instead of sectarianism. Through Menassat we try to change the Arab world from within, not from the outside. We fight for freedom of speech and to inform the public objectively using traditional journalistic standards."

Free press can be a powerful tool...



Admirable courage

By Hans Verploeg

Photo © Maarten van den Haak

The conference room in Nieuwspoord might be a bit overcrowded, it only adds to the pleasant atmosphere. This time around, independent Arab journalists deliver their opening speeches to a crowd of Dutch colleagues, development cooperation specialists, ministerial employees and the staff of Free Voice. The Fitna row -which dominated Dutch politics last spring- is done away with as a Dutch problem by these Arab journalists. Their audiences and they themselves have other things to worry about: raging conflicts between armed groups and clashes with censors, state unions and other less independent media, who do suck up to the ruling elite.

It's almost thirty years since I became an activist for the rights of independent journalists in countries where press freedom doesn't count, but I am still deeply touched by the frankness and courage of these colleagues. Attempts to prevent Algerian editor-in-chief and poet Said Mekbel in 1994 to return to his country -a country torn by civil war where the only certainty was the liquidation of independent journalists, writers and teachers - these attempts failed because of his steadfastness. His death, only a few weeks later, stirred up more than just the usual few lines in Dutch papers. Many quoted the last column he wrote in his newspaper *Le Matin*: "The thief who sneaks along the walls on his way home, it is you. The man firmly resolved not to

die with his throat slashed, it is you. It is you who can't do anything with your hands, apart from writing your little pieces. A smile, a friendly joke for everyone, here at the newspaper, it is you. The man waging war with his light and subtle pen as his weapon, a war against both the small daily tragedies of ordinary people as well as the fundamental problems of the country, this man is you."

Once again during essential parts of the seminar, it's our Arab guests in particular who belie the still existing thesis that freedom is a culturally defined phenomenon. Like no one else they experience, on a daily basis, the importance of independent journalism and media in the face of intolerant regimes and merciless terrorists. At an earlier point it was ascertained that human rights activists and journalists in the Middle East are more and more defying imposed restrictions and crossing red lines. It's a good thing that organisations such as Free Voice - with financial support from the Dutch Government and the Postcode Loterij- are involved in this budding development; all this in countries plagued for decades by conflict and censorship.

Hans Verploeg is the Chairman of Free Voice and has been an active member and leader of national and international journalist unions.



Photo © Maarten van den Haak

Hind Laroussi (23) is a talented singer with a Dutch mother and a Moroccan father. With her special charisma and warm voice she can easily represent pop music, Fado and Arabian classics. At the conference dinner she performed a Fairouz cover, Habaytek Besaif, while the international guests clapped their hands and sang along.

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What to watch this year...?

Planned activities for Investing in the Future 2009

- "Professional Standards and Protection of Journalists", regional workshops on editorial codes of practice for media organisations, quality in journalism and legal issues.
- Workshop for parliamentarians, legal experts and media experts in the MENA region.
- "Supporting Photojournalism in the MENA region" organized by World Press Photo and Free Voice.
- "Topical and skills training" on: web publishing; financial reporting; investigative journalism; searching the web for journalistic purposes; newsroom management; reporting on the environment.
- Follow-up Train the Trainers.
- Country programs in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen.
- Legal program.

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